

ACEP-ALE News Flashes

From the NRCS Easement Program Division (EPD)



Director's Corner

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Acting Director
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NRCS Staff from all 50 states participated in the Programs Roll Out training in early February, hosted by the NRCS Programs Deputy Area in Indianapolis, Indiana. The training provided a platform for state programs staff and leadership to learn about updates to the delivery of conservation programs for producers and landowners and a peek at new systems.

Easement Programs Division (EPD) staff continue to identify program implementation improvements to reduce the time to close easements and increase the pace of agricultural land preservation by increasing consistency in easement enrollment, acquisition and stewardship. As part of this project, EPD has provided States with access to landownership information through Regrid and updated ACEP policy to include the complete application requirements for ACEP-ALE. Over the next few months, EPD will initiate a streamlined process to offer certification to eligible entities that meet the statutory requirements and provide updated communication on responsibilities for easement acquisition with a timeline to meet the estimated closing date of the landowner and eligible entity with NRCS.

EPD is committed to continuing to implement Chief Bettencourt's number 1 priority to Preserve and Protect Agricultural Land by expanding targeted conservation easement programs to slow the loss of

5,000 acres of farmland per day.

We hope you continue to support NRCS in this priority through our collaboration through ACEP-ALE.

Eligible Entity Certification

NRCS has been working to expand the number of certified entities by launching certification initiatives that proactively notify potentially eligible entities who qualify for administrative flexibilities during acquisition phase. Prior to 2023, six eligible entities were certified.

In FY 2023:

- 4 entities were certified following traditional processes.
- 27 entities were accepted through the streamlined certification process.
- 46 total certification offers were made.

In FY 2024:

- 1 entity was certified following traditional processes.
- 15 entities were accepted through the streamlined certification.
- 34 total certification offers were made.

In FY 2025:

- 1 nationwide entity expanded state coverage following traditional processes.

To date:

- 53 total certified entities.

The Easement Programs Division is analyzing current data to offer streamlined certification in FY 2026 to eligible entities that meet the statutory requirements.

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program

The Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) helps landowners, Indian tribes, land trusts, and other entities protect working farms and ranches through conservation easements. ACEP is administered by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

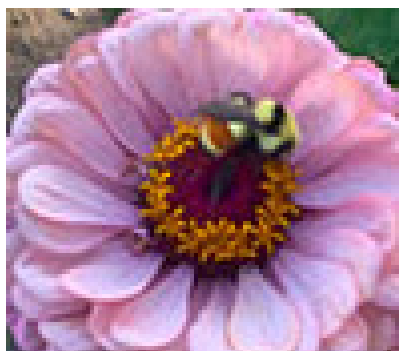
Under the Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) component, NRCS helps American Indian tribes, state and local governments, and nongovernmental organizations protect working agricultural lands and limit nonagricultural uses of the land.

NRCS accepts program applications on a continual basis, but establishes application batching dates for evaluation, ranking, and funding selection of eligible applications. Applications received after the batching date are deferred to the next funding period.

Ranking deadlines for each state can be found on the NRCS website at www.nrcs.usda.gov/ranking-dates.

More information about ACEP can be found at www.nrcs.usda.gov.

ACEP-ALE News Flashes FY 2026 Edition 2



ACEP-ALE Updates

NRCS received 486 ACEP-ALE parcel applications by the Jan. 15, 2026, batching deadline.

- Reminders:
 - Check with the easement staff in your state to see if additional batching deadlines will be established for FY 2026. NRCS accepts applications year-round, but batching deadlines are established to rank and fund applications throughout the year. Ranking deadlines are posted on the NRCS website at www.nrcs.usda.gov/ranking-dates.
 - Items required for a complete ACEP-ALE application per policy are:
 - NRCS-CPA-41A, "Parcel Sheet for Entity Application for an Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) Agreement"
 - Map of Proposed Parcel Boundary and access
 - Property Deed or proof of ownership
 - Written Pending Offer
 - Additional items may be required prior to obligation, NRCS staff will request that information as needed.
 - If you need assistance with completing your ACEP-ALE application, please utilize the resources NRCS has developed with American

Farmland Trust and the Land Trust Alliance:

- [ACEP-ALE Toolkit](#)
- [ACEP-ALE Options for Integrating Minimum Deed Terms](#)
- [ACEP-ALE Minimum Deed Terms with Commentary](#)



Land Transfer Navigators Attend Training in Sacramento

Approximately 50 Land Transfer Navigators from across the country attended training in Sacramento, California, to hone their skills in helping agricultural landowners plan for farm and ranch transfers that benefit retiring and aspiring generations.

Three years ago, the American Farmland Trust and NRCS launched the Land Transfer Navigators project to increase the transfer of farm and ranch land to the next generation of farmers and ranchers.

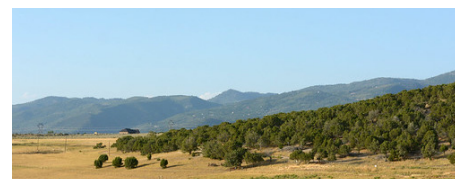
Goals for the training included:

- ♦ Explore examples of land transfers through real-life scenarios with a focus on multiple types of support ecosystems that made them possible.
- ♦ Examine successful land transitions that integrated concepts introduced through the Land Transfer Navigator project.
- ♦ Discuss ways that land transfer can happen equitably to support both retiring and aspiring landowners.
- ♦ Improve facilitation skills to provide high quality technical assistance.
- ♦ Build supportive relationships among navigators and foster a sense of community.

To date, Land Transfer Navigators have had the following impact:

- ♦ Number of farmers reached – 47,481
- ♦ Number of ranchers reached – 2,697
- ♦ Number of non-operating landowners reached – 3,827
- ♦ Number of protected acres impacted – 416,891
- ♦ Number of unprotected acres impacted – 391,606

To learn more about the Land Transfer Navigators project, visit farmland.org/land-transfer-navigators.





Partner Updates



American Farmland Trust's ACEP-ALE Toolkit: Minimum Deed Terms Resources

In case you missed it, be sure to check out the ACEP-ALE Toolkit on American Farmland Trust's Farmland Information Center website. Developed to help entities and farm and ranch landowners participate in ACEP-ALE, the toolkit covers each step of the process from eligibility to stewardship and contains useful guides, checklists, and fact sheets as well as links to NRCS policy and forms.

For instance, if you need help developing your deed, there are two resources in the toolkit you can use: The ACEP-ALE Options for Integrating Minimum Deed Terms one-pager details options for including MDTs into the final easement deed and provides considerations for each, including the level of NRCS approval required. The ACEP-ALE Minimum Deed Terms with Commentary explains the 2020 minimum deed terms and provides additional information and examples for each. And if you are not finding

what you need, AFT staff are available to answer questions about ACEP-ALE and other farmland protection programs and policies. Submit requests through AFT's Farmland Information Center website or contact staff at (800) 370-4879.

These resources were developed for AFT's Land Transfer Navigators program with support from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

[American Farmland Trust Website](#)



For nearly two decades, NRCS has partnered with the land trust community to protect America's family farmers and ranchers in local communities through NRCS conservation easement programs. Recognizing the need to strengthen program implementation for land trusts, NRCS and the Land Trust Alliance (LTA) began a partnership in 2018 to develop new training, enhance technical resources, and create opportunities for ongoing dialogue to expand access to NRCS conservation easements. The partnership launched a series of Conservation Easement Summits held in 2018, 2022, and 2024. These Summits brought land trust practitioners together with NRCS and LTA staff to strengthen program participation. Resulting in working groups, training, and online resources to increase program efficiency.

With an increasing need for direct support for entities, the NRCS-Alliance partnership expanded in 2023, growing capacity from one staff member to a six-person team offering direct services to entities and supporting families, and farmers and ranchers in their communities. Four team members now serve as the NRCS Conservation Acquisition Team



New Tools to Assist with Farm Transfer

American Farmland Trust released a Farm Transfer Toolkit on the Farmland Information Center website. The toolkit is designed for owners of farm and ranch land seeking to transfer their land, operation, or both to an incoming producer. It outlines steps in the farm transfer process and contains tools to help users set goals, assess their finances, communicate with stakeholders, and work with professionals to finalize decisions and implement a transfer plan. The Farm Transfer Action Plan, a supporting resource, builds off the toolkit content and is designed to help landowners get organized, make decisions, and begin the transfer process.



(NCAT) providing technical assistance to land trusts across the country.

NCAT Services In Action

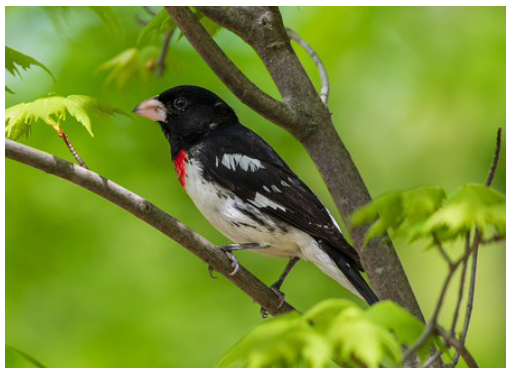
Fully staffed and launched in mid-2024, NCAT has demonstrated significant impact by assisting 11 entities with submitting 23 parcel applications in less than two years. Several applications in the initial batch have been obligated for funding and the team continues to provide support on these projects through the acquisition process.

Hear what three land trusts who have utilized NCAT services have to say:

Alaska Farmland Trust

"We use ACEP-ALE because it's one of the few tools that truly works for Alaska's unique agricultural landscape."

"With relatively new staff doing the ACEP NRCS applications this year, we took the advice of LTA Pacific Northwest staff and reviewed— and used — the ACEP-ALE program toolkit on their [the Land Trust Alliance's] website. The toolkit provided detailed answers to some of the most common questions that arise with the NRCS ALE applications. We just recently submitted the parcel application for a project in Palmer, Alaska. We had several conversations with the [NCAT] project specialist about what was required, what might change a project's eligibility, and how to use some of the tools, such as the Web Soil Survey. It was very helpful, and we are



very grateful for the quick responses and the detailed answers."



Alaska Farmland Trust staff at the Grover Farm conservation easement closing. Back Row, from left to right: Jackie Kragel, USDA-NRCS; Leslie Senden, board president AFTC; Abby Austin, executive director AFTC; Sabra Fiscus, daughter of Bonnie and Wesley Grover; Carol Kenley, former board member AFTC; Bob Jones, board member AFTC; Debbie Niekamp, daughter of Bonnie and Wesley Grover; Garth Grover, son of Bonnie and Wesley Grover; Kristy Saunders, daughter of Bonnie and Wesley Grover. Front Row, from left to right: Margaret Adsit, lands coordinator AFTC; Bonnie Grover, landowner; Wesley Grover, landowner.

Kettle Moraine Land Trust

"Our county is approximately 60% farmland, and KMLT holds two agricultural easements already. As we grow, we recognize local farm fields are increasingly being developed into new subdivisions, and we are losing our open space."

"KMLT was planning to pursue ACEP-ALE funding for a new easement opportunity but learned of the new January 15 deadline in late December



thanks to an LTA e-mail newsletter. Working with Dyan from NCAT was amazing, and the tools, insight and assistance we received were invaluable...We could have never accomplished that without the support of NCAT."

Nevada Land Trust

"It has been a few years since NLT had the capacity to pursue any NRCS applications, so when the NCAT team was formed and the land trust community was invited to come on board, I jumped at the opportunity."

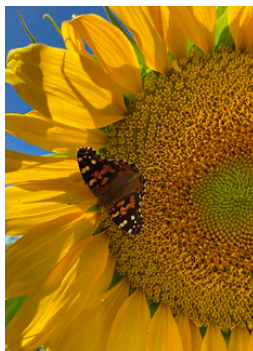
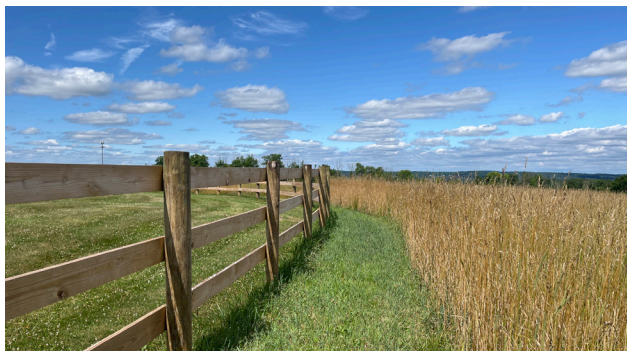
"NCAT helped me fast-track my learning and skills development around the NRCS program. I consider Josh a mentor, and am grateful for his support, from double-checking applications and answering multiple questions, to helping me navigate the many nuances of this work."

"NCAT has really helped us become more knowledgeable and confident... The NCAT team has helped us become better partners to our landowners and to our state NRCS office in a relatively short amount of time. We are so grateful!"

The Alliance NRCS partnership team continues to build momentum in 2026. New resources are in development, and NCAT stands ready to provide support to Alliance members. If your land trust is interested in receiving support, contact the team at NCAT@lta.org.

[Land Trust Alliance Website](https://lta.org)





Success Stories from Across the Country

Lauzier Farm Becomes Forever Farmland, South Hadley, Massachusetts

While South Hadley is no longer a predominantly rural community, the town still maintains an important agricultural footprint. While smaller farms have disappeared over the decades, several large farms remain a valuable part of the community. The Lauzier Farm on Alvord Street is the last of its size at 205 acres. Their fields have provided nourishing feed for dairy cows and local vegetables for decades in South Hadley. Thanks to strong support from the community, it's now been protected permanently.

Over the years, the land has been cared for by the owners of McCray's Dairy Farm and Barstow's Longview Farm—two local farms that Kestrel Land Trust helped conserve over the last decade. At 100 acres, McCray's is the only other large active farm in the area, just to the north of the Lauzier farmland. Both farms benefit from their close proximity to the Connecticut River, which has provided fertile floodplain soil for growing crops.

Kestrel Land Trust worked for several years in partnership with the farm owners, the Town of South Hadley, and the broader community to protect Lauzier Farm with an Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR) now held by the Commonwealth's Department of Agricultural Resources (MDAR). The APR protects the farmland from development, requires that it remain in active agricultural use, and keeps the land affordable for future owners. Federal funding came from NRCS's Agricultural Conservation Easement Program - Agricultural Land Easement (ACEP-ALE).

To leverage \$1.7 million in state and federal funding to purchase the APR, local entities needed to raise matching funds of \$190,000. The South Hadley Conservation Commission committed \$40,000, local residents donated \$7,000, and Kestrel Land Trust raised the remaining funding from generous local residents and Kestrel donors. These included gifts from more than 150 individuals, including a former South Hadley resident who reached out to Kestrel and generously offered to bridge the final, significant gap with a leadership donation. Local businesses supported the effort as well.

Now that the farm is conserved, a new chapter will begin with its recent caretakers, the Barstow family of Hadley. Barstow's Longview Farm owners plan to grow hay and field corn to feed their dairy herd using no-till planting practices to reduce erosion, protect soil health, and boost carbon storage on the land, said Denise Barstow Manz, a family spokesperson.





Kohala Farmland Easement Protects Land for Food Production, Kohala, Hawai'i

Hawai'i Land Trust (HILT) and Island Harvest Inc. permanently protected regenerative food-producing lands in the Kohala community through NRCS's ACEP-ALE program. The conservation easement ensures that 28 acres of land will continue to grow healthy food and remain available for future generations of farmers.

This conservation easement will ensure the integrity and rural character of the Kohala community remains intact. It is an important step as Hawai'i has the fourth highest agricultural land costs in the country, according to the National Ag Statistics Service. Not only is it expensive, but it also faces direct and continuous threats of land use conversion and fragmentation.

Island Harvest, founded by a long-time Kohala resident, transitioned old sugar cane plantation lands into organic and regenerative macadamia nut farming, enabling generations of local Kohala families to maintain agricultural jobs. After operating on year-to-year leases for more than 30 years, Island Harvest purchased the 28-acre parcel in 2020 to expand into diversified agriculture, all while maintaining a team where 80 percent of its crew is born and raised in Kohala.

Today, Island Harvest grows approximately 5 acres of 'ulu and 11 acres of citrus and macadamia nuts on the parcel, with farm activity structures limited to less than half an acre. Island Harvest reinvests 100 percent with 50 percent going to its regenerative farming practices, 25 percent to the Kohala community and organizations, and 25 percent is shared with its employees.



Some of the Island Harvest Farm Team. Photo courtesy of Island Harvest



Ranchers Protect Land for Family, Oconee County, Georgia

As lifelong residents of Oconee County, Georgia, Paula and Steven Nedza protected 40 acres of their 136-acre parcel with a ACEP-ALE conservation easement. In a partnership between Athens Land Trust, Oconee County Farmland Preservation Committee, and NRCS, the 40 acres will be protected in perpetuity. The Nedza family considers themselves stewards of the land.

The farm has been in Paula's family for several generations. The Nedzas manage 50 head of Angus and Black Baldy cattle with a rotational grazing system.

Due to the county's proximity to Athens, it has experienced significant growth. From 2014 to 2024 the population rose nearly 30 percent, a total increase of 10,000 residents during the ten-year period.

Development pressure, along with the desire to leave the land to their children and grandchildren, spurred the Nedzas to place a portion of their land in ACEP-ALE.

"I don't really own this land. I want to be a good steward of it. I've been blessed with a wonderful family, beautiful land, and why would I want to dismantle that?"
Steven Nedza

"So, what are my grandkids gonna grow up looking at...will it be this acreage? Yes, it will be this,"
Steven Nedza

In addition to raising cattle, Nedza wants to further the family's agricultural practice by engaging in micro farming—or the development of small sections of farmland to grow specialty crops—and agritourism, with the goal of education.

Nedzas want future generations to learn about farming, agriculture and the process of growing their own fruits and vegetables.

Vital Agricultural Land Permanently Protected, Gallatin County, Montana



A voluntary conservation easement will now protect 190 acres of farmland near Bozeman, Montana. In partnership with the Bos family, Gallatin Valley Land Trust, Gallatin County Open Lands Program, and NRCS, the easement ensures vital agricultural land, critical wildlife corridors, and scenic views will remain open and protected forever.

This project marks the second collaboration between Gallatin Valley Land Trust and the Bos family, who began dairy farming in the area in 1957.

After David and Marilyn Bos conserved 250 acres of their original farmland in 2009, the family later acquired the neighboring property where the new easement was placed.

Today, the third generation of Bos farmers, Shawn and Annie, raise wheat, barley, alfalfa, and canola for seed on the newly conserved ground.